

**A SYNOPSIS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRINITARIAN THOUGHT
FROM THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH FATHERS TO THE SECOND
CENTURY APOLOGISTS**

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INTRODUCTION

“What is truth?” The writer of this paper believes this to be one of the most amazing statements in the Bible. Why? Because when Pontius Pilot uttered this famous question he was standing face to face and looking eye to eye at eternal truth; and he did not see it! For the first two centuries of the Christian church, men of God took it upon themselves to study, expound, and publish works explaining their faith in the Christian God. Why? Because they stood face to face and looked eye to eye with a pagan world that claimed to desire truth but rejected it when they saw it. This world not only rejected the truths of God’s Word, they attacked it.

Within the early church men responded by presenting to the public a series of treatises challenging the opponents of Christianity. These writers were called apologists. When the earliest apologists wrote they were not intending to define the Christian faith but to defend it. For this reason, the earliest Christian writings do not contain any deep systematic theology. This is perhaps due to the intended audience. Most of these apologetic works counter the attacks of the philosophical world and are themselves thoroughly philosophic. However, one may still glean from these writings various and valuable theological truths.

The aim of this research is to offer a chronological overview of the first, and second century Christian writers. This overview will pertain solely on the development of Trinitarian thought. The Trinity was not a primary focus among these writers. Nevertheless, it is possible to find dotted throughout these works both allusions and explicit statements supporting Trinitarian theological convictions.

This paper will not offer any comprehensive survey of the themes, doctrines

or theologies represented by the church fathers. It only seeks to identify any development of understanding regarding the holy Trinity among the works which these fathers produced. For example, Irenaeus' main focus was to defend against heresy. It was not to establish a systematic theology for the Trinity. Still, there are enough references to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to extrapolate, with confidence, where Irenaeus stood with regard to the Godhead. The same is true about all the works cited.

There are a few works, such as *First and Second Clement*, the *Diatessaron*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas* which are not addressed in this paper. These works do not contain enough data regarding the Trinity to merit much investigation. The *Diatessaron* is a harmony of the gospels compiled by Tatian.¹ Though it does speak much of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, no original thoughts from its author are provided.

This paper will present a two-fold proposition. First, primary source evidence will suggest that from Ignatius to Theophilus there was a digression away from an orthodox understanding of the Trinity. However, Irenaeus' writings reversed that digression and returned the early church fathers back towards an orthodox understanding of the Godhead. Second, despite this digression, it is still possible to take the works of these writers and construct an orthodox understanding of the Trinity.²

To accomplish such a task, this paper will chronologically survey the

¹Irenaeus has this to say about Tatian: "A certain man named Tatian first introduced the blasphemy. He was a hearer of Justin's, and as long as he continued with him he expressed no such views; but after his martyrdom he separated from the Church, and, excited and puffed up by the thought of being a teacher, as if he were superior to others, he composed his own peculiar type of doctrine. He invented a system of certain invisible Aeons, like the followers of Valentinus; while, like Marcion and Saturninus, he declared that marriage was nothing else than corruption and fornication. But his denial of Adam's salvation was an opinion due entirely to himself." (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* Book I-28:1)

²Except for Aristedes, all primary source quotes are taken from Alexander Roberts' and James Donaldson's. ed. *The Writings of the Fathers Down to A. D. 325 Anti-Nicene Fathers*. Vol 1. and *The Writings of the Fathers Down to A. D. 325 Anti-Nicene Fathers*. Vol 2. Second printing. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson. 1995.

Christian writers of the first two centuries. Secondly, there will be an analysis of the early developments of Trinitarian thought. Finally, this work will construct an orthodox definition of the Trinity out of quotes cited from these church fathers. The finished product will be compared to the definition of the Trinity as established by the Council of Nicae in 325 A. D. This exercise will clearly demonstrate that the writings of the first two centuries provided foundational elements with which the fourth century fathers could use for the development of the Nicene creed.

A SYNOPSIS OF TRINITARIAN THOUGHT AMONG FIRST AND SECOND CENTURY NON-APOLOGETIC WRITINGS

Ignatius

If Ignatius' *Second Epistle to St. John* and *Epistle to the Virgin Mary* are authentic then he was not only one of the first church fathers, but was also personally acquainted with Jesus' mother and brother James. This, however, is almost universally challenged by the academic world.³ Nevertheless, Ignatius' early date puts his life within a generation of the apostles. His mere proximity to the first century church makes him a very important figure.

Ignatius does not offer any systematic work on the Trinity. Though, he has much to say about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, his works are primarily Christocentric. In his *Epistle to the Philippians*, Ignatius writes "neither the Father nor the Paraclete, but the Son only (became incarnate) for the 'Word became flesh... And God the Word was born a man."⁴ In his *Epistle to Hero, a Deacon of Antioch* he offers this formulaic statement:

For I believe in the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in His only-begotten Son,

³Seven of Ignatius' fifteen works are considered at best spurious. This paper does use one quote from Ignatius to construct an orthodox statement of the Trinity-His only-begotten Son (Ignatius, Phil:3). However, this statement can be easily substantiated by a number of other sources.

⁴Ignatius. *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Philippians*, 3.

that God will show me, Hero, upon my throne. Add speed, therefore, to thy course. I charge thee before the God of the universe, and before Christ, and in the presence of the Holy Spirit.⁵

Ignatius seldom speaks of the Father without immediately referencing the Son. In his *Epistle to the Antiochians* he states “The Evangelists, too, when they declared that the one Father was ‘the only true God,’ did not omit what concerned our Lord.”⁶ In his *Epistle to the Philippians* he writes, “For... there is one God of the universe, the Father of Christ, ‘of whom are all things;’ and one Lord Jesus Christ, our [Lord], ‘by whom are all things.’”⁷

Ignatius defends both the deity and humanity of Jesus. In his *Epistle to the Tarsians*, Ignatius writes that “Jesus the Lord was truly born... of a woman... And He really suffered, and died, and rose again.”⁸ He further states that Jesus was the “Son of God... and God the Word, who also created all things.”⁹ To the *Antiochians* Ignatius writes:

Whosoever, therefore, declares that there is but one God, only so as to take away the divinity of Christ, is a devil... He also that confesseth Christ, yet not as the Son of the Maker of the world ... is an instrument of the devil. And he that rejects the incarnation, and is ashamed of the cross... is antichrist. Moreover, he who affirms Christ to be a mere man is accursed, according to the [declaration of the] prophet, since he puts not his trust in God, but in man.¹⁰

Ignatius offers numerous references to the Holy Spirit. On several occasions he does define His position within the Godhead. To the Philippians he writes “For if there is one God of the universe, the Father of Christ, ‘of whom are all things;’ and one Lord Jesus Christ, our [Lord], ‘by whom are all things;’ and also one Holy Spirit, who wrought

⁵Ignatius. *The Epistle of Ignatius to Hero*, 7 .

⁶Ignatius. *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Antiochians*, 4.

⁷Ignatius. *Philippians*, 1.

⁸Ignatius. *Epistle to the Tarsians*, 3.

⁹Ignatius. *Tarsians*, 4.

¹⁰Ignatius. *Antiochians*, 5.

in Moses, and in the prophets and apostles.”¹¹ Ignatius offers his best description of the unity between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in his *Epistle to the Philippians*. Chapter two of this work is titled *Unity of the Three Divine Persons*. Herein lies Ignatius’ understanding of the Godhead:

There is then one God and Father, and not two or three; One who is; and there is no other besides Him, the only true [God]. For "the Lord thy God," saith [the Scripture], "is one Lord." And again, "Hath not one God created us? Have we not all one Father? And there is also one Son, God the Word. For "the only-begotten Son," saith [the Scripture], "who is in the bosom of the Father." And again, "One Lord Jesus Christ." And in another place, "What is His name, or what His Son's name, that we may know? " And there is also one Paraclete. For "there is also," saith [the Scripture], "one Spirit," since "we have been called in one hope of our calling." And again, "We have drunk of one Spirit," with what follows. And it is manifest that all these gifts [possessed by believers] "worketh one and the self-same Spirit." There are not then either three Fathers, or three Sons, or three Paracletes, but one Father, and one Son, and one Paraclete. Wherefore also the Lord, when He sent forth the apostles to make disciples of all nations, commanded them to "baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," not unto one [person] having three names, nor into three [persons] who became incarnate, but into three possessed of equal honour.¹²

It is clear that Ignatius holds an exalted view of each person of the Trinity. What is not clear is if he understands the three to possess the same essence. Equal honor and equal essence are not the same. Therefore, a critic could read subordination into the writings of Ignatius. However, that would be very difficult to adequately substantiate.

Polycarp

Like Ignatius, Polycarp lived in direct contact with Christians of the first century church. Legend has it that the apostle John discipled him. He eventually became the Bishop of Smyrna. Unfortunately, Polycarp’s *Epistle to the Philippians* is his only work to survive. This letter has a pastoral and not a theological focus. With regard to the Trinity, it is Christocentric. Another work relating to Polycarp is Pionius’ *The Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna*. This letter documents his martyrdom.

Polycarp speaks of God the Father as “Him who raised up our Lord Jesus

¹¹Ignatius. *Philippians*, 1.

¹²Ignatius. *Philippians*, 2.

Christ from the dead, and gave Him glory, and a throne at His right hand.”¹³ God Almighty is “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... His Father, who raised Him from the dead.” Like Ignatius, Polycarp speaks of God the Father only in relation to the Son.

Jesus is the Lord who “suffered for our sins... whom God raised from the dead...” through whom we “are saved, not of works, but by the will of God.”¹⁴ In Jesus Christ “all things in heaven and on earth are subject. Him every spirit serves. He comes as the Judge of the living and the dead”¹⁵ for “we must all appear at the judgement-seat of Christ.”¹⁶

Polycarp defends Jesus’ incarnation by saying “For whosoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is antichrist.”¹⁷ However, Jesus is much more than man. He is the Son of God. He is the judge of the world. He is “our everlasting High Priest” who will “build you up in faith and truth, meekness, gentleness, patience, long-suffering, forbearance, and purity” for all “who shall believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, and in His Father, who raised Him from the dead.”¹⁸

Polycarp does not mention the Holy Spirit. Neither does he does speak explicitly regarding the unity between the Father and the Son. His most exalted words about God the Father, God the Son and his only mention of the Holy Spirit were not written by him. He spoke them as his last prayer moments before his execution. Pionius recorded this prayer in his *Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna*:

¹³Polycarp. *Epistle to the Philippians*, 2.

¹⁴Ibid., 1.

¹⁵Polycarp. *Philippians*, 2 .

¹⁶Ibid., 6 .

¹⁷Ibid., 7 .

¹⁸Ibid., 12 .

O Lord God Almighty, the Father of thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, the God of angels and powers, and of every creature, and of the whole race of the righteous who live before thee, I give Thee thanks that Thou hast counted me, worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of Thy martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption [imparted] by the Holy Ghost. Among whom may I be accepted this day before Thee as a fat and acceptable sacrifice, according as Thou, the ever-truthful God, hast fore-ordained, hast revealed beforehand to me, and now hast fulfilled. Wherefore also I praise Thee for all things, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, with whom, to Thee, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen.¹⁹

Polycarp neither repudiates, nor confirms a Trinitarian theology. His primary focus is on the life and work of Jesus Christ. There is no intent on diminishing either the Father or the Holy Spirit. They simply are not the focus of Polycarp's only surviving epistle.

The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus

The writer of the *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus* has kept himself anonymous. Mathetes (disciple) establishes his authority on the basis of "having been a disciple of the Apostles."²⁰ In Pauline tradition Mathetes claims "I am become a teacher of the Gentiles. I minister the things delivered to me to those that are disciples worthy of the truth." One cannot say with certainty whether or not he was a disciple of the apostles. Most authorities date this work around 130. The main focus of this letter is to exalt Christianity over both paganism and Judaism. It may not be a far stretch to declare Mathetes "the first of the apologists."²¹

Typical of second century Christian literature, this epistle is Christocentric with no direct address to the Trinity. Mathetes does not even acknowledge the Holy Spirit. Except for a few references, God the Father is spoken of only in conjunction with

¹⁹Pionius. *Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna*, 14.

²⁰Mathetes. *Epistle to Diognetus*, 11.

²¹Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. ed. *The Writings of the Fathers Down to A. D. 325 Anti-Nicene Fathers*. Vol 1. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995) 23.

the Son. Still, the Father is “truly God Himself, who is almighty, the Creator of all things.”²²

Mathetes saves his most exalted descriptions for the Son of God. Jesus is “the truth and the holy incomprehensible Word... the very creator and Fashioner of all things... a king... sent to men as a savior.”²³ Jesus is the one “who was from the beginning, who appeared as if new, and was found old, and yet who is ever born afresh in the hearts of the saints. This is He who, being from everlasting, is today called the Son.”²⁴ At one point, Mathetes’ Epistle breaks out into an anthem of praise that can be compared to Paul’s adoration of God at the end of Romans chapter eleven:

He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for them that are mortal... O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! that the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!.. He desired to lead us to trust in His kindness, to esteem Him our Nourisher, Father, Teacher, Counsellor, Healer, our Wisdom, Light, Honour, Glory, Power, and Life.²⁵

Mathetes exalts God the Father and declares Him almighty. The Son is “from everlasting.” There is also a sense of unity in that “He (God the Father) formed after His own image, to whom He sent His only-begotten Son, to whom He has promised a kingdom in heaven.”²⁶ Mathetes speaks of both the Father and the Son separately as being the Fashioner of all things. They are both eternal yet there is a distinct “relation subsisting between them.”²⁷

There is no implication of Trinitarian thought in Mathetes’ *Epistle to*

²²Mathetes. *Diognetus*, 7 .

²³Ibid., 7.

²⁴Mathetes. *Diognetus*, 11 .

²⁵Ibid., 9

²⁶Ibid., 10.

²⁷Ibid., 8.

Diognetus. The nature of the unity between the Father and the Son as expressed by Mathetes is unclear. There are no explicit, or even implicit declarations regarding a unity of essence, or substance between the Father and the Son. God did indeed send Jesus to Earth, however, there are no words declaring the actual incarnation of Christ. The virgin birth is not mentioned.

A SYNOPSIS OF TRINITARIAN THOUGHT AMONG THE APOLOGISTS

Aristides

No one is sure of the exact date of Aristides' Apology. Nevertheless most histories approximate its composition around the year 140.²⁸ Except for Quadratus²⁹, Aristides' work is the oldest surviving apologetic treatise of the second century. Though addressed to Emperor Hadrian, this Apology treats him not as a king, but as a philosopher. It argues that Christianity is the only religion worthy of any consideration.³⁰

The flavor of Aristides' *Apology* is not theological, but philosophical. The New Testament is only occasionally quoted. Aristides assumes that his readers will already believe in a supreme God. In his book *The Early Christian Doctrine of God*, Robert Grant says this about Aristides' Apology:

In the Apology of Aristides we find that 'God is the unmoved mover and ruler of the universe, for everything that moves is more powerful than what is moved, and that which rules is more powerful than what is ruled.' This doctrine is an Aristotelian expression of the biblical doctrine of creation, and like the statements which follow really takes God's eternity and omnipotence for granted."³¹

²⁸Philip Carrington. *Christian Apologetics of the Second Century: In Their Relation to Modern Thought*. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1921) 23.

²⁹Quadratus is a lost apology. However a small portion has been preserved as a quote by the historian Eusebius. Eusebius. *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History: Complete and Unabridged*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998). 110.

³⁰Carrington. *Christian Apologetics of the Second Century*. 23.

³¹Robert M. Grant. *The Early Christian Doctrine of God*. (Charlottesville: Press of Virginia, 1966). 16-17.

There is both a Greek and Syriac version of *The Apology*. In both versions Aristides opens with this philosophical definition of God:

I call God him who made all things and sustains them, without beginning, eternal, immortal, complete and incomprehensible... there is no deficiency in Him... He has no name... He has no likeness... He is not male, nor female: the heavens do not contain Him... Adversary He has none that is more powerful... Error and forgetfulness are not in His nature... In Him consists all that consists.³²

On the basis of this definition of God, Aristides proceeds to contrast pagan religions with Judaism and Christianity. It is only the Jews and Christians who properly worship one God. He argues that the supreme God is the one worshiped by Jews and Christians and that the plethora of deities worshiped by all other religions is nothing more than “myths, flimsy words, altogether devoid of force.”³³ All other religions teach polytheism.³⁴

Aristides never speaks of the “Trinity.” However, one may glean explicit statements regarding the deity of God the Father and of God the Son. The deity of the Father and the Son is both implicitly addressed and explicitly expressed.

Regarding God the Father, Aristides states that “He is God of all, who made all for the sake of man... Now I say that God is not begotten, not made; a constant nature, without beginning and without end; immortal, complete, and incomprehensible.”³⁵ Regarding the Son he writes “the Christians, then, reckon the beginning of their religion from Jesus Christ, who is named the Son of God most High; and it is said that God came down from heaven, and from a Hebrew virgin took and clad himself with flesh, and in a

³²Helen B. Harris. *The Newly Recovered Apology of Aristides, Its Doctrine and Ethics*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1891). 80–81.

³³Harris. *The Newly Recovered Apology of Aristides*. 103.

³⁴Robert M. Grant. *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1988) 37.

³⁵J. Armitage Robinson. ed. *Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature*. vol I. *The Apology of Aristides, The Passion of S. Perpetua, the Lord's Prayer in the Early Church, The Fragments of Heracleon*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1891. Reprinted by Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint Limited, 1967), 34.

daughter of man there dwelt the Son of God.”³⁶

There is no ambiguity in Aristides’ perception of God the Father and God the Son. They are both God. However, less clear is his understanding of their unity. Still, one can easily extrapolate unity from his *Apology*. Aristides argues that pagans “have not understood of God our Lord, that while He is one, He is yet in all... God who is one in His nature has a single essence proper to Him, and He is equal in His nature and His essence...”³⁷ If God has a “single\equal essence” who has a “constant nature” yet is both “God most high and... God (who) came down from heaven... and clad himself with flesh” then there must be an absolute union between God the Father and God the Son.

It is not difficult to narrow Aristides’ *Apology* to this concise creed:

We believe in God Maker of heaven and Earth (48) And in Jesus Christ the Son of God From a Hebrew virgin(36) He was pierced by the Jews He died and was buried after three days He rose and ascended into Heaven (37) Let all those who do not know God anticipate the dread judgement Which is to come by Jesus the Messiah(51)³⁸

As stated earlier, Aristides never mentions the Trinity. The Holy Spirit also is never mentioned. The only allusion to a “spirit” is in this one statement: “For they do not call brothers those who are after the flesh, but those who are in the spirit and in God.”³⁹ It is unclear whether the phrase “in the spirit” speaks of the Holy Spirit, or the spirit of man. The context indicates it is more likely the latter.

Even though the Holy Spirit is never mentioned, it is clear that Aristides believed there to be a union between God the Father and God the Son. This neither contradicts nor challenges a Trinitarian doctrine. Thus, any subsequent apologies, or writings that would exalt the Holy Spirit and declare His deity would not undermine, or repudiate anything said by Aristides.

³⁶Ibid., 36.

³⁷Ibid., 47.

³⁸Ibid., 36-51

³⁹Ibid., 49.

What is clear is that for Aristides the unity of God did not subordinate Jesus. According to Helen B. Harris' *The Newly Recovered Apology of Aristides*, "His person (Jesus) was evidently the central point of faith; and the words which describe that Person are clear and explicit." She then lauds Aristides by saying "For this fearless fidelity to his Lord... the church of the nineteenth century owes him a debt of deepest gratitude."⁴⁰ Finally, Harris defends Aristides by arguing that his binitarian formula harmonized perfectly with the Trinitarian formula that would develop over the next two hundred years:

"It is said that God came down from heaven, and from a Hebrew virgin took and clad Himself with flesh: and in a daughter of man there dwelt the son of God.' This simple statement is thoroughly in harmony with the formula evolved in the heat of battle two centuries later, upon which the Church still leans, and from which it has learned neither to confound the Persons nor to divide the substance of the Triune God."⁴¹

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr is considered the most important apologist of the second century. Like the previous writings, Justin's works are mainly Christocentric. The Father and the Holy Spirit are usually mentioned in conjunction to Jesus. As in the previous works, there are no systematic statements regarding the unity and substance of the Trinity. Unlike many of the previous works cited, Justin's writings speak very often of the Holy Spirit.

For Justin, God is "the Father and Creator of all."⁴² He is the "provider of all things"⁴³ and is "superior to the things that are to be changed."⁴⁴ God the Father is

⁴⁰Helen B. Harris. *The Newly Recovered Apology of Aristides, Its Doctrine and Ethics*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1891). 29-31.

⁴¹Harris. 29-31 .

⁴²Justin Martyr. *First Apology*, 7.

⁴³Ibid., 10.

⁴⁴Ibid., 20.

“unbegotten... Creator, and Lord, and Master.”⁴⁵ He is holy and is to be both feared and exalted.⁴⁶

According to Justin, “Jesus Christ is the only proper Son who has been begotten by God, being His Word and first-begotten.”⁴⁷ He is “the first power after God the Father...the Word”⁴⁸ who “existed formerly as Son of the Maker of all things, being God, and was born a man by the Virgin.”⁴⁹ “He is divine.”⁵⁰

In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin goes to great lengths to establish Jesus’ divinity with references from the Old Testament. He writes that:

For if you had understood what has been written by the prophets, you would not have denied that He was God, Son of the only, unbegotten, unutterable God...He who is both God and the Angel, sent by the Father.⁵¹ And that Christ being Lord, and God the Son of God, and appearing formerly in power as Man, and Angel, and in the glory of fire as at the bush, so also was manifested at the judgment executed on Sodom, has been demonstrated fully by what has been said.⁵²

Justin argues for the Oneness of God. In his work *The Sole Government of God*, he uses past philosophers to buttress his argument that there is only one God. To do this he quotes the philosophers Aeschylus, Sophocles, Philemon, Orpheus, and Pythagoras. The sole purpose of this work is to argue that many non-Christian Greek philosophers understood there to be only one God. Justin counters Roman and Greek pantheism not only with Scripture, but also with philosophy.

Justin also establishes the unity of essence between the Father and the Son. In

⁴⁵Justin Martyr. *Second Apology*, 6.

⁴⁶Justin Martyr. *Dialogue with Trypho*, 37.

⁴⁷*First Apology*, 23.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁹*Dialogue*, 48.

⁵⁰*First Apology*, 10.

⁵¹*Dialogue*, 126.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 128.

his *Dialogue with Trypho* he writes this to Trypho:

I have discussed briefly in what has gone before; when I asserted that this power was begotten from the Father, by His power and will, but not by abscission, as if the essence of the Father were divided; as all other things partitioned and divided are not the same after as before they were divided: and, for the sake of example, I took the case of fires kindled from a fire, which we see to be distinct from it, and yet that from which many can be kindled is by no means made less, but remains the same.⁵³

Justin, in his *First Apology*, speaks of the “holy and divine Spirit of prophecy.”⁵⁴ However, his primary discourse regarding the Holy Spirit centers on function and not nature.⁵⁵ He describes the Holy Spirit as an intermediary between man and God-“we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁶ The mind of man cannot see God “if it is uninstructed by the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁷ The prophets of old were able to glorify the Father and Son only after “being filled with the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁸ Only those who are filled with Holy Spirit can answer the question “Who is the King of glory?... The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory.”⁵⁹ Mankind is reproached by the Holy Spirit and Jesus is revealed through the Holy Spirit⁶⁰ The prophets of old declared to the people “the Holy Ghost, who descended upon them, chose to teach through them.”⁶¹

Justin not only readily acknowledges the Holy Spirit. He also believes the Holy Spirit is to be an object of worship: “with respect to the most true God, the Father...

⁵³Ibid., 128

⁵⁴*First Apology*, 32.

⁵⁵This will be true of all the apologists.

⁵⁶*First Apology*, 67.

⁵⁷*Dialogue*, 4.

⁵⁸Ibid., 7.

⁵⁹Ibid., 36.

⁶⁰Ibid., 37.

⁶¹Justin Martyr. *Hortatory Address to the Greeks*, 35.

and the Son... and the prophetic Spirit, we worship and adore.”⁶² He also supports a Trinitarian baptismal formula which states: “For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water.”⁶³

There are, however, a couple of perplexing statements that suggests Justin may see the relationships between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a subordination framework. In one place he says: “For he gives the second place to the Logos which is with God... and the third place to the Spirit.”⁶⁴ In chapter three of his *First Apology* he further proclaims:

Our teacher of these things is Jesus Christ... the Son of the true God Himself, and holding Him in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third, we will prove. For they proclaim our madness to consist in this, that we give to a crucified man a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of all; for they do not discern the mystery that is herein, to which, as we make it plain to you, we pray you to give heed.⁶⁵

Edmund J. Fortman in his *The Triune God* notes that Justin does speak of the Holy Spirit with a “sub-personal sound, but it becomes more personal when he speaks of the prophetic Spirit.”⁶⁶ The implications of the previous listed quotes do support a subordinate view of the Holy Spirit. However, the evidence of Justin’s works, as a whole, do not. Justin himself declares that “It is wrong, therefore, to understand the Spirit and the power of God as anything else than the Word, who is also the first-born of God.”⁶⁷

Justin understands the Word to be Jesus. He believes that Jesus and God the

⁶²*First Apology*, 6.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 61.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 60.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁶Edmund J. Fortman. *The Triune God*. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1972) 47.

⁶⁷*First Apology*, 33.

Father are one in essence. He believes that the Spirit is the Word. One may therefore conclude that Justin believes that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all deity and are all one. Justin's statement regarding the mystery of union sounds very similar to the mystery of the hypostatic union as defined by the fourth century church fathers.

Athenagoras

The only surviving work of Athenagoras is his *Plea for the Christians*. This treatise is thoroughly philosophical. Athenagoras argues against the charge that Christians are atheists. Like Justin, he employs the words of Greek philosophers in an attempt to prove that monotheism is not new to the Christians. The *Plea for the Christians* is also primarily theocentric.

Athenagoras insists that "our doctrine acknowledges one God."⁶⁸ He is "one uncreated God, the Framer of the universe."⁶⁹ The Christian God "is the one God from the beginning, and the sole Maker of the world."⁷⁰ God is "uncreated, eternal, invisible, impassible, incomprehensible, illimitable..., encompassed by light, beauty, and spirit, and power ineffable."⁷¹ Though the essence of his work is philosophical, Athenagoras does refer to the Scriptures to substantiate the oneness of God:

The Lord is our God; no other can be compared with Him." And again: "I am God, the first and the last, and besides Me there is no God." In like manner: "Before Me there was no other God, and after Me there shall be none; I am God, and there is none besides Me." And as to His greatness: "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is the footstool of My feet: what house win ye build for Me, or what is the place of My rest? " But I leave it to you, when you meet with the books themselves, to examine carefully the prophecies contained in them, that you may on fitting grounds defend us from the abuse cast upon us.⁷²

This *Plea for the Christian* is not Christocentric. Jesus is impersonally

⁶⁸Athenagoras. *A Plea for the Christian*, 4.

⁶⁹Ibid., 6.

⁷⁰Ibid., 8.

⁷¹Ibid., 10.

⁷²Ibid., 9.

referred to as the “Son,” or “Logos.” This represents the most significant difference between Athenagoras and the other apologists. He never once distinguishes the son with the name of Jesus, or the title of Christ.

Athenagoras declares that all things were made “by the Logos which is from Him.”⁷³ Though God is the “Framer of the universe... (He has) framed all things by the Logos.”⁷⁴ There is only one God from whom the Logos proceeds. This Logos is “inseparable from Him, (and through whom) all things are in like manner subjected.”⁷⁵ The clearest understanding of the relationship between the Father and son, according to Athenagoras, is encapsulated in the following statement:

the universe has been created through His Logos... Nor let any one think it ridiculous that God should have a Son... But the Son of God is the Logos of the Father, in idea and in operation; for after the pattern of Him and by Him were all things made, the Father and the Son being one. And, the Son being in the Father and the Father in the Son, in oneness and power of spirit, the understanding and reason and the Word of the Father is the Son of God. But if, in your surpassing intelligence, it occurs to you to inquire what is meant by the Son, I will state briefly that He is the first product of the Father, not as having been brought into existence for from the beginning, God, who is the eternal mind had the Logos in Himself, being from eternity instinct with Logos... The prophetic Spirit also agrees with our statements. "The Lord," it says, "made me, the beginning of His ways to His works."⁷⁶

The power of God is demonstrated through the Holy Spirit. God is “the Framer of the universe” and He indeed “framed all things by the Logos,” but He “holds them in being by His Spirit.”⁷⁷ The witnesses and prophets of old “who have pronounced concerning God... (were) guided by the Spirit of God.”⁷⁸ These prophets were “lifted in ecstasy above the natural operations of their minds by the impulses of the Divine

⁷³Ibid., 4.

⁷⁴Ibid., 6.

⁷⁵Ibid., 18.

⁷⁶Ibid., 10.

⁷⁷Ibid., 6.

⁷⁸Ibid., 7.

Spirit.”⁷⁹ For this reason Athenagoras declared “it would be irrational for us to cease to believe in the Spirit from God.”⁸⁰

Athenagoras does offer several passages that suggest a Trinitarian framework. As a Christian he declares “we acknowledge a God, and a Son his Logos, and a Holy Spirit, united in essence,-the Father, the Son, the Spirit, because the Son is the Intelligence, Reason, Wisdom of the Father, and the Spirit an effluence, as light from fire.”⁸¹ As stated earlier, God is the Framer. He framed all things through His Son and the Holy Spirit holds all things together.⁸² The most salient text regarding a Trinitarian concept offers this statement:

Who, then, would not be astonished to hear men who speak of God the Father, and of God the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and who declare both their power in union and their distinction in order, called atheists?.. to be accounted pious; while men who reckon the present life of very small worth indeed, and who are conducted to the future life by this one thing alone, that they know God and His Logos, what is the oneness of the Son with the Father, what the communion of the Father with the Son, what is the Spirit, what is the unity of these three, the Spirit, the Son, the Father, and their distinction in unity.⁸³

In this work, Athenagoras does not personify either the Son, or the Holy Spirit. They seem to be distinct expressions of the Father, but not distinct persons from the Father. He never once addresses the humanity of the Son. Indeed, it appears that Athenagoras may have been more influenced by Hellenistic philosophy than Scripture. The Son is described as being the “Logos, patterned after God, the intelligence, reason and wisdom of the Father, the first product of the Father.”⁸⁴ The Logos of Athenagoras could easily have been embraced by Gnosticism because He is devoid of any humanity.

⁷⁹Ibid., 9.

⁸⁰Ibid., 7.

⁸¹Ibid., 24.

⁸²Ibid., 6.

⁸³Ibid., 12.

⁸⁴This is a capsulation of various statements already sourced in the paper.

Though Athenagoras never speaks of essence or person of the Son and the Holy Spirit, he does imply a unity and equality. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit possess a “distinction in unity.” He speaks of God the Father and God the Son. He speaks of the “impulses of the Divine Spirit.” There is certainly a “unity of these three.” According to Fortman, Athenagoras may not develop an economic trinity, but he does indicate an “eternal immanent Trinity.” He states that such an understanding prior to the year 180 is “most remarkable and marks a great advance in the development of trinitarian thought.”⁸⁵

Athenagoras recognizes both a plurality and unity within God. Though He never addresses the humanity of Jesus it would be presumptuous to argue that he did not embrace this doctrine. The same applies with the Holy Spirit. He never addresses the Holy Spirit as a person, but this does not suggest that he denied the person of the Holy Spirit.

Theophilus

Theophilus' *To Autolycus* carries with it the same philosophically charged theocentric imprint of Athenagoras's *Plea for the Christians*. It is obvious that his audience is Greek and philosophic. *To Autolycus* is divided into three books. Book I can be defined as a defense of the existence of only one God-He being the Christian God. Book II displays a chronological survey of Bible History. Book III offers a defense of Christian practices.

According to Theophilus, God is “ineffable and indescribable, ... incomprehensible, in greatness unfathomable, in height inconceivable, in power incomparable, in wisdom unrivalled, in goodness inimitable, in kindness unutterable.”⁸⁶ God is eternal, “unbegotten, unchangeable, immortal, forseeing, ruler over the universe,

⁸⁵Edmund J. Fortman. *The Triune God*. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1972) 49.

⁸⁶Theophilus. *Theophilus to Autolycus*, I-3.

Father, Fashioner, the Highest, and Almighty.”⁸⁷ What is interesting is that unlike the other apologists, Theophilus does not offer any attempt to argue for the oneness of God. It is certainly implied, but not explicitly established. For Theophilus, it is not God’s unity, but his transcendence that captures his passion:

For if I say He is Light, I name but His own work; if I call Him Word, I name but His sovereignty; if I call Him Mind, I speak but of His wisdom; if I say He is Spirit, I speak of His breath; if I call Him Wisdom, I speak of His offspring; if I call Him Strength, I speak of His sway; if I call Him Power, I am mentioning His activity; if Providence, I but mention His goodness; if I call Him Kingdom, I but mention His glory; if I call Him Lord, I mention His being judge; if I call Him Judge, I speak of Him as being just; if I call Him Father, I speak of all things as being from Him.⁸⁸

Unfortunately, the God of Theophilus appears to be far removed from mankind. He alludes to God as Father only a few times and never in an intimate manner. God is “Father, indeed, of all” but he “cannot be contained, and is not found in a place.”⁸⁹

The Son of God is most often referred to as “the Word,” or “Logos.” Like Athenagoras, Theophilus never once mentions the name Jesus or the title of Christ. Yet, God made all things “by His Word... (where) God is found... to say, Let us make man in Our image, after OUR Likeness.”⁹⁰ Theophilus declares the Son to be God’s “power and wisdom, assuming the person of the Father and Lord of all.”⁹¹ The Son is a “counselor, being His own mind and thought... ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God... The Word was God...’ The Word, then, being God, and produced from God.”⁹²

For Theophilus, the Word is primarily the power through whom God has wrought creation. Even this position, however, is presented in a confusing manner, for he

⁸⁷Ibid., I-4.

⁸⁸Ibid., I-3.

⁸⁹Ibid., II-22.

⁹⁰Ibid., II-18.

⁹¹Ibid., II-22.

⁹²Ibid., II-22.

tends to blur any distinction between the Son of God and the Holy Spirit:

God, then, having His own Word internal within His own bowels, begat Him, emitting Him along with His own wisdom before all things. He had this... and by Him He made all things. He is called "governing principle" because He rules, and is Lord of all things fashioned by Him. He, then, being Spirit of God, and governing principle, and wisdom, and power of the highest, came down upon the prophets, and through them spoke of the creation of the world and of all other things. For the prophets were not when the world came into existence, but the wisdom of God which was in Him, and His holy Word which was always present with Him."⁹³

When Theophilus speaks singularly of the Holy Spirit it is always in conjunction with His being an illuminator, or inspirer of men. It is the Holy Spirit through whom the prophets "being inspired and made wise by God, became God-taught, and holy. And righteous."⁹⁴ The prophets of old through the illumination of the Holy Spirit "foretold the things that have already happened."⁹⁵ These holy prophets were "possessed by the Holy Spirit of God."⁹⁶ The world has in its possession the Genesis record of creation only because "Moses the servant of God recorded through the Holy Spirit."⁹⁷

Theophilus definitely has some understanding of unity in the Godhead. When he describes the creation account, God, the Spirit and the Word are all present. "God created the heavens... the earth... the deep... And by the Spirit ... he gave life to man... His Word... lit up all that was under heaven."⁹⁸ What is most striking is that Theophilus is the first to use the term "trinity" in reference to the Godhead. Though the reference is indirect:

For the sun is a type of God, and the moon of man. And as the sun far surpasses the moon in power and glory, so far does God surpass man. And as the sun remains ever full, never becoming less, so does God always abide perfect, being full of all power, and understanding, and wisdom, and immortality, and all good. But the

⁹³Ibid., II-10.

⁹⁴Ibid., II-9.

⁹⁵Ibid., I-14.

⁹⁶Ibid., III-17.

⁹⁷Ibid., III-23.

⁹⁸Ibid., II-13.

moon wanes monthly, and in a manner dies, being a type of man; then it is born again, and is crescent, for a pattern of the future resurrection. In like manner also the three days which were before the luminaries, are types of the Trinity, of God, and His Word, and His wisdom.⁹⁹

Theophilus never mentions the incarnation. He makes no reference to the equality of the Son and the Spirit. The Father, Son and the Spirit are all intimately involved in the creation and sustenance of the world. However, God is presented as being removed and impersonal. If one were to read Theophilus' work he would not realize that God had a Son who was Jesus the Christ who was born of a virgin and took on human form. This reader would not realize that Jesus died for his sins, was buried and three days later rose from the dead and presented himself to the Father on behalf of the world. Just like Athenagoras' work, a Gnostic could read Theophilus and walk away in almost total agreement.

However, Theophilus never denies the incarnation. He does not deny that the Son of God came to earth in human form. He just does not affirm this. His understanding-as documented by his works-do not challenge orthodoxy with regards to the doctrine of the Trinity. His picture is simply incomplete.

Irenaeus

Irenaeus lived and wrote up to the very end of the second century. Whereas the previous writers all seemed to embrace questionable elements with regard to the Trinity, Irenaeus' works lands him upon a straight path towards Nicea. His works are somewhat Theocentric, but they are primarily Christocentric. Other writers spoke of the Logos, the Son of God. Irenaeus speaks of Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God.

Irenaeus' five books are all named *Against Heresies*. Though his writings are apologetics which attack false teachings, they are saturated with explicit and implicit statements regarding the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Irenaeus demonstrates that God the Father is "the only God, the only Lord,

⁹⁹Ibid., II-15.

the only Creator, the only Father, alone containing all things.”¹⁰⁰ He is “Omnipotent, ... above every Principality, and Power, and Dominion, and Virtue: He is Father, He is God, He the Founder, He the Maker.”¹⁰¹

God is “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... who is His Son, through Him He is revealed and manifested to all.”¹⁰² He is “one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them.”¹⁰³ Like all the previous writers, Irenaeus exalts the transcendent God. However, for Irenaeus God the Father is also a personal knowable Father:

If therefore, at the present time, having the earnest, we do cry, "Abba, Father," what shall it be when, on rising again, we behold Him face to face; when all the members shall burst out into a continuous hymn of triumph, glorifying Him who raised them from the dead, and gave the gift of eternal life? For if the earnest, gathering man into itself, does even now cause him to cry, "Abba, Father," what shall the complete grace of the Spirit effect, which shall be given to men by God? It will render us like unto Him, and accomplish the will of the Father; for it shall make man after the image and likeness of God¹⁰⁴.

Irenaeus both exalts and enfleshes the Son with equal veracity. The Son is “Christ Jesus... who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God.”¹⁰⁵ Jesus is “the only begotten.”¹⁰⁶ He is “the Word of God (who) was made man, He who was the Son of God became the Son of man.”¹⁰⁷ Jesus, conceived of a virgin became “God with us.”¹⁰⁸ He has

¹⁰⁰Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*, I-1:1.

¹⁰¹Ibid., II-30:9.

¹⁰²Ibid., II-30:9.

¹⁰³Ibid., I-10:1.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., V-8:1.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., I-10:1.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., III-16:2.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., III-19:1.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., III-19:3.

become “the Mediator between God and men; propitiating indeed for us the Father against whom we had sinned, and canceling our disobedience.”¹⁰⁹

Irenaeus declares that in Jesus “the Word was made flesh; that even as the Word of God had the sovereignty in the heavens, so also might He have the sovereignty in earth.”¹¹⁰ In a fragment from one of his lost writings, Irenaeus delivers this formula:

With regard to Christ, the law and the prophets and the evangelists have proclaimed that He was born of a virgin, that He suffered upon a beam of wood, and that He appeared from the dead; that He also ascended to the heavens, and was glorified by the Father, and is the Eternal King; that He is the perfect Intelligence, the Word of God, who was begotten before the light; that He was the Founder of the universe, along with it (light), and the Maker of man; that He is All in all: Patriarch among the patriarchs; Law in the laws; Chief Priest among priests; Ruler among kings; the Prophet among prophets; the Angel among angels; the Man among men; Son in the Father; God in God; King to all eternity. For it is He who sailed [in the ark] along with Noah, and who guided Abraham; who was bound along with Isaac, and was a Wanderer with Jacob; the Shepherd of those who are saved, and the Bridegroom of the Church; the Chief also of the cherubim, the Prince of the angelic powers; God of God; Son of the Father; Jesus Christ; King for ever and ever. Amen.¹¹¹

Irenaeus spends much more time deliberating on the incarnation of the Son. However, he does have much to say about the Holy Spirit. Though he never calls the Holy Spirit God he certainly considers him divine. He states that one must not be “deprived of the Divine Spirit (else) they fail to attain to the kingdom of heaven.”¹¹² After Jesus was baptized “did the Spirit of God rest upon Him, and anoint Him to preach the Gospel.”¹¹³ This same Spirit was with Him before all creation.¹¹⁴

For Irenaeus, The Holy Spirit “rests in men... working in them the Father’s

¹⁰⁹Ibid., V-17:1.

¹¹⁰Ibid., IV-20:2.

¹¹¹Irenaeus. *Lost Fragments*, 53.

¹¹²Ibid., 36.

¹¹³*Against Heresies*, III-9:3.

¹¹⁴Ibid., IV-20:3-4.

will, renewing them so that they pass from the old self into the newness of Christ.”¹¹⁵ He brings union and fellowship between God and man.¹¹⁶ He perfects and prepares men for immortality.¹¹⁷ The only reason why believers can trust the Scriptures are perfects is because “they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit.”¹¹⁸ Irenaeus proclaims that “where the church is, there is also the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and all grace; for the Spirit is truth.”¹¹⁹

Though Irenaeus never uses the word “Trinity,” there is no doubt he believes in the divinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He declares that all believers must have “faith in one God, the Father Almighty... and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God... and in the Holy Spirit.”¹²⁰ He also states, “I have also largely demonstrated, that the Word, namely the Son, was always with the Father; and that Wisdom also, which is the Spirit, was present with Him, anterior to all creation.”¹²¹

When compared to all other first and second century writers, Irenaeus’ descriptions and understanding of the roles and relationships between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the most complete. With Irenaeus, there can be no doubt regarding his belief in the oneness of God and the union of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. His works are not one dimensional. Irenaeus’ God is both transcendent and immanent. He is high and exalted and close and personal. Jesus was both God and man. The Holy Spirit is the divine force that prepares men and inspires the Scriptures. These three, the Father, Son

¹¹⁵Ibid., III-17:2.

¹¹⁶Ibid., V-1:2.

¹¹⁷Ibid., V-8:1.

¹¹⁸Ibid., II-28:2.

¹¹⁹Ibid., III-24:1.

¹²⁰Ibid., III-18:3.

¹²¹Ibid., IV-4:23.

and Holy Spirit are distinct, but work together in an eternal union.

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS IN TRINITARIAN THOUGHT

The council of Nicae convened in 325 a.d. During this council the Christian church hammered out what is known today as the Nicene Creed. Within this creed is an orthodox declaration of the Trinity. This research originally set out to determine if it was possible to trace a systematic development of the doctrine of the Trinity during the two hundred years prior to the Nicene council.

The works of eight early church fathers has just been surveyed. The dates of these works range from the late first century to the end of the second. They deal with issues such as paganism, Judaism, Gnosticism, various and sundry heresies, Greek philosophy, and persecution. Woven throughout the fabric of these works are bits and pieces of information regarding God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

However, when these works are looked at chronologically what develops is not a progression, but a digression of thought. As one traces inferences and statements regarding the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and their relationships to each other, he will discover the emergence of two strands of thought. The first strand deals with the diminishing of the humanity of the Son. The second exposes an intellectual movement towards an impersonal and transcendent God. From Ignatius to Theophilus, God continually transcends and Jesus's humanity steadily diminishes. With the arrival of Irenaeus this digression is finally reversed. This is not a simple and straight digression. However, there is a gradual slipping from orthodoxy. Yet, throughout all the ebb and flow of Christian thought there always remained a belief that there was some level of oneness and equality between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In defense of these writers, it must be noted that these works were not written for the purpose of exploring the "hypostatic" union of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For this reason any treatment of the Trinity-or its lack of attention-must be addressed with caution. It would be unjust to be too critical. Straw men always look impressive, but they

can never stand up to honest scrutiny.

A CONSTRUCTION OF AN ORTHODOX UNDERSTANDING OF THE TRINITY BASED UPON FIRST AND SECOND CENTURY DOCUMENTS

Despite the divergences of thought, if one harmonizes all of the first and second century works and extracts all of the passages dealing with the Father, Son, Holy Spirit and their relationships to each other then it will be possible to construct an orthodox understanding of the Trinity. Below is a chart comparing the Nicene Creed with various statements which have been extracted from the chronicles of the early church fathers.

Council of Nicae	Trinity Construct
1. We believe in one God,	1. There is then one God and Father (Ignatius, Phil:2)
2. the Father Almighty,	2. O Lord God Almighty (Pionius, 14)
3. maker of all things visible and invisible;	3. Creator of all things (Mathetes, Diognetus:7) the invisible becoming visible (Irenaeus, II-16:6)
4. and in one Lord Jesus Christ,	4. And in one Lord Jesus Christ (Irenaeus, Book IV-20:3)
5. the Son of God,	5. But the Son of God (Athenagoras, Plea:10)
6. the only-begotten of his Father,	6. His only-begotten Son (Ignatius, Phil:3) He sent His only-begotten Son (Mathates, Diognetus:11)
7. of the substance of the Father,	7. We acknowledge a God and a Son and a Holy Spirit, united in essence (Athenagoras, Plea:24)
8. God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,	8. God in God (Irenaeus, LR:53)
9. begotten, not made,	9. He is the first product of the Father, not as having been brought into existence for from the beginning, God, who is the eternal mind had the Logos in Himself, being from eternity instinct with Logos (Athenagoras, Plea:10)

Council of Nicae	Trinity Construct
10. being of one substance with the Father.	10. We acknowledge a God and a Son and a Holy Spirit, united in essence (Athenagoras, Plea:24)
11. By whom all things were made,	11. By Him He made all things (Theophilus, Auto-II:22)
12. both which be in heaven and in earth.	12. He formed all things that were made by His Word that never wearies (Irenaeus, II-2:4)
13. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven]	13. God came down from heaven (Aristides, Apology:36)
14. and was incarnate and was made man	14. Who became incarnate (Irenaeus, Book I-10:1) was made man (Irenaeus, Book III-19:1)
15. He suffered and the third day he rose	15. Jesus suffered for our sins (Polycarp Phil:1) He died and was buried and after three days rose (Aristides, Apology:37)
16. again, and ascended into heaven.	16. And ascended into heaven (Aristides, Apology:37)
17. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead.	17. He comes as the judge of the living and the dead (Polycarp Phil:1)
18. And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost.	18. We acknowledge a God and a Son and a Holy Spirit, united in essence (Athenagoras, Plea:24) faith in one God, the Father Almighty... and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God... and in the Holy Spirit.” (Irenaeus, III-18:3)
19. And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was, or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.	19. Note: This statement was written explicitly for the Arian controversy. There was no Arian heresy prior to the third century.

CONCLUSION

With such a wealth of sources one can expect to reproduce the Nicene Creed. One may also glean from these sources a number of passages that suggests an altogether different story. It is possible for a person to pick and choose only those passages that imply subordination. It is also possible to extract from these documents passages that will suggest tri-theism, or di-theism. One can even choose certain texts that will resonate with Gnosticism. However, when one looks at the whole corpus of the early church fathers he will realized that the preponderance of the evidence suggests orthodoxy. Therefore, this writer stands firm on the belief that the chosen passages used to construct an orthodox statement of the Trinity justly represent the convictions and beliefs of the early church fathers.

Among these early Christian writers the word “substance” is never used, but the word “essence” is. The “hypostatic union” is never discussed, but a number of trinitarian formulas which mitigate an internal equality are espoused. The distinction between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not often expounded. But, the fact that the church fathers ascribe different operations to the three suggests a distinction. The Holy Spirit is never personified, but he is exalted as being worthy of worship.

It is amazing to think that none of these works set out to develop or prove the Trinity. None of the texts developed a systematic theology for the Trinity. None of these documents considered the Trinity a primary, or even secondary focus. Yet, collectively, in conjunction with Scripture, these writings laid the foundation and supplied ample resources through which the fourth century fathers could use to officially articulate the Triune God of the Nicene Creed.

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